

# The Gunpowder Plot: Fact or Royal Plot? (1605) <sup>1</sup>

“A strange letter, from a strange hand, by a strange messenger; without date to it, name at it, and (I had almost said) sense in it. A letter which, even when it was opened, was still sealed such the affected obscurity therein.”

—Thomas Fuller <sup>2</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Based on the Domestic and Foreign State Papers dealing with the Reign of James I. Preserved at the Public Record Office, and at the British Museum, additional MSS. 6178. Taken as an extract from Lochithea's *Spyglass Duets: The Elizabethan & Jacobean Plotters* (New York: iUniverse, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Church History, book X, p. 32.

## I

“’Tis well known,” William Harris <sup>3</sup> had noted, “that many of the papists then have denied the fact, and imputed the whole of the affair to the artifice of Salisbury [Robert Cecil] and we are told, that others of opposite principles have confidently asserted, ‘that there never was any such thing’ really as the Gunpowder Plot, but that it was a plot of King James’s contriving, to endear himself unto the people.” True or not, let us delve into the history of this “plot” and see if we can derive our own conclusions on what happened, since the gunpowder records for 1605 are conveniently missing from the Tower of London archives and though there is an enormous volume of evidence of this nature circulating, it would be tedious to catalogue and mention it all in this article. Most of the evidence given by the government of the time looks trivial, but together it produces a solid case for doubt about the orthodox view.

When Queen Elizabeth I died, on March 24, 1603, there were some prejudices against the accession of a foreigner, and as the Crown had not always descended in a regular succession, the Elizabethan Privy Council did not immediately upon the notice of Elizabeth’s death proclaim James as King, but spent several hours in deliberating together, and in feeling each other’s pulses on this most important subject. Under such circumstances the High Sheriff of Hampshire took a bold and decided part, which proved his attachment to the House of Stewart: Instead of waiting for the orders of the Council in London, the result of whose deliberations could not with any certainty be known, the High Sheriff on hearing that Elizabeth was dead, hurried over to Winchester, and there proclaimed James, King of England. This bold fellow was Sir Benjamin Tichborne; he came from a family more ancient in England than the conquest who had been Knighted by Elizabeth in 1601 in her progress to Basing. It may seem extraordinary that Elizabeth should lavish her favours on known Catholic Recusants, as the Mayor of Winchester, Sir Henry Tichborne, Lord Montague, and the Earl of Southampton just to name a few who were Catholic; yet so the case stood. She knew how to retain the laws in favour of those who pleased her. <sup>4</sup> But we also have another hasty messenger who wanted to give the news of Elizabeth’s death to James: this was Sir Robert Carey, who waited under the windows of the Palace at

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<sup>3</sup> (a) *An Historical and Critical Account* (1753); (b) Causabon, *Of Credulity and Incredulity* (London: 1668), Vol. I, p. 202, 8vo.

<sup>4</sup> (a) Nichols, *Progresses of King James I* (1828), Vol. I; (b) Drake’s *History of York*, p. 130.

Richmond, until a token ring was thrown to him from the window, with which he posted off to Scotland, and was cordially received by James, as the bearer of tidings of great joy. Here is his written venture from his autobiography:

“Very early on Saturday, I took horse for the north, and rode to Norham about twelve at noon, so that I might have been with King James at supper time: but I got a great fall by the way, that made me shed much blood. I was forced to ride at a soft pace after, so that King James was newly gone to bed by the time I knocked at his gate. I was quickly let in, and carried up to his chamber. I kneeled by him, and saluted him by his titles of King of England, Scotland, France, and Ireland. The King gave me his hand to kiss, and bade me welcome. He inquired of the manner of Queen Elizabeth’s death and sickness. He asked what letters from the Privy Council. I told him none; yet had I brought him a blue ring from a fair Lady, which I hoped would give him assurance that I reported the truth. He took it and looked upon it, and said, ‘It is enough; I know by this you are a true messenger.’ Then he [James] committed me to the care of the Lord Hume,<sup>5</sup> charging him that I should want for nothing. He sent for his surgeons to attend me, and, when I kissed his hand to withdraw, he said these gracious words: ‘I know you have lost a near Kinswoman,<sup>6</sup> and a loving Mistress; but here, take my hand, I will be as good a master to you, and will requite this service with honour and reward.’”

King James kept a constant and private correspondence with several persons of the English Court during many years before Elizabeth died. Among them was Lady Scroope, sister to Sir Robert Carey, to whom James sent, by Sir James Fullerton, a sapphire ring, with positive orders to return it to

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<sup>5</sup> Wood’s Douglas, Vol. I, p. 736: “Alexander Hume, sixth Lord Hume, was served heir to his father November 1, 1580, in the offices of Sheriff of Berwick and Bailie of Laudurdale. He stood high in the favour of King James; and was very instrumental in suppressing the insurrection of Bothwell in 1592, for which he had a grant of the dissolved Priory of Coldingham. Being a Roman Catholic, he made his repentance in the New Kirk, before the Assembly, on his knees, May 17, 1594; and in 1599 he was sent on a secret Embassy to Rome, to gain the favour of the Roman Catholic Princes, as a necessary precaution towards facilitating James’s accession to the English throne. He was sworn a Privy Counselor to James whom in April, 1603, entertained at Dunglass, and accompanying the King to England, was there naturalized. He was created Earl of Hume and Lord Dunglass, to him and his heirs male whatever, March 4, 1604/5; had charters of the benefices of Coldingham and Jedburgh, united into the temporal Lordship of Coldingham, May 20, 1610; and of East Gordon and Fogo, February 7, 1612. Alexander Hume died April 5, 1619.”

<sup>6</sup> Sir Robert Carey and his sister were cousins, in the third degree to Queen Elizabeth by descent from Mary Boleyn and William Carey. Elizabeth’s mother (Anne Boleyn) was from a noble family. Her father Thomas was the Earl of Wiltshire and her mother was the daughter of the Duke of Norfolk.

him by a special messenger as soon as the Queen was actually dead. Lady Scroope had no opportunity of delivering it to her brother whilst he was in the Palace of Richmond; but waiting at the window till she saw him at the gate, she threw it to him.<sup>7</sup> The King, a few days after, asked Sir Robert Carey what reward he wished, who replied he wished to be made a gentleman of his bed-chamber.

“I was then sworn of his bed-chamber, and that very evening I helped to take off his clothes, and stayed till he was in bed. Upon the report of the Queen’s death, the East Border broke forth into great unruliness, insomuch as many complaints came to the King thereof. I was desirous to go to appease them, but I was so weak and ill of my head, that I was not able to undertake such a journey; but I offered that I would send any two deputies, that should appease the trouble and make them quiet, which was by them shortly after effected. Now I was to begin a new world; for, by the King’s coming to the Crown, I was to lose the best part of my living. For my office of Wardenry ceased, and I lost the pay of forty horses, which were not so little both as £1,000 per annum. Most of the great ones at Court envied my happiness, when they heard I was sworn of the King’s bed-chamber; and in Scotland I had no acquaintance; I only relied on God and the King. The one never left me, the other, shortly after his coming to London, deceived my expectation, and adhered to those that sought my ruin.”

Lord Corke at the time offered his opinion and some insight on Carey’s sayings that will further lead us to understand King James’s character: “Neither the severities of Osborne, nor the more just censure of Rapin, nor several bitter strokes that have been vented by every late writer against James have wounded that Monarch so effectually as what here falls from Sir Robert Carey’s pen. Osborne may be said to write with rage; Rapin not to be totally free from prejudice; most of the others, to swim with the stream, and not to give themselves sufficient time to weigh the good and evil; but the author of these *Memoirs* appears so evidently void of that haste which accompanies revenge, that what he here says of himself and his royal Master may be depended upon as a truth; a truth that shows how unhappily King James was governed by favourites, and how easily he forgot his promises.”<sup>8</sup> Yet, the

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<sup>7</sup> Brydges’ *Peers of King James*, p. 413.

<sup>8</sup> Lord Corke, *Sir Robert Carey’s Memoirs*.

State Papers of the time present Sir Robert Carey as being unable to disguise his selfishness: “At the same time, they greatly reprobate the officiousness of the self-appointed envoy, Carey; this probably caused his hope for reward to be delayed some months. He mourns over his disappointed hopes, in his autobiography, with so little disguise of selfishness, that his lamentations are truly laughable.”

The hurried expedition of Sir Robert Carey was quickly followed by an express from the English Privy Council inviting James to come to London, and take possession of his hereditary right, as he had been proclaimed, on March 24, 1603, King of England, by the title of James I, and the inhabitants that night lighted bonfires; an event that grief for the loss of their late mistress was confined to a few.<sup>9</sup> The expense of James and his train in his journey from Scotland appears from an authenticated statement to have been £10,752 whereas funeral charges of Elizabeth were £17,498.<sup>10</sup>

A French writer, M. L’Abbé Destombes, had observed that the plots undertaken under Elizabeth and James have this feature in common: “That they proved, one and all, extremely opportune for those against whom they were directed.”<sup>11</sup> To such a policy, the Gunpowder Plot was no exception. Whatever be the true history of its origin, it certainly placed in the hands of Sir Robert Cecil a most effective weapon for the enforcement of his favourite policy, and materially strengthened his own position. Without doubt the sensational manner of the plot’s “discovery” largely contributed to its success in this respect; and if this were ingeniously contrived for such a purpose, may it not be that a like ingenuity had been employed in providing the material destined to be so artistically utilized?



Sir Robert Cecil  
(1563–1612)

At the period with which we have to deal, the Chief Minister of King James was Sir Robert Cecil (Earl of Salisbury) the political heir of his father, Lord Burghley (1520–1598) and of Sir Francis Walsingham (*d.*1590), his predecessor in the office of Secretary. It is clear Cecil had inherited from them ideas of Statesmanship of the order then in vogue, and from nature, the kind of ability required to put these plots successfully in practice. “This great Minister of State and the staff of the Queen’s

<sup>9</sup> Devereux B. Walter, *Lives and Letters of the Devereux Earls of Essex, in the Reigns of Elizabeth, James I, and Charles I* (1853), Vol. II.

<sup>10</sup> Nichols, *Progresses of King James I* (1828), Vol. I.

<sup>11</sup> M. L’Abbé Destombes, *La persécution en Angleterre sous le règne d’ Elizabeth*, p. 176.

declining age, though his little crooked person could not provide any great supportation [*sic*] yet it carried thereon a head and a headpiece of vast content, and therein, it seems, nature was so diligent to complete one, and the best, part about him, as that to the perfection of his memory and intellectuals, she took care also of his senses, and to put him in *Lynceos oculos* [to pleasure him the more] borrowed of Argus, so to give him a perfective sight. And for the rest of his sensitive virtues, his predecessor had left him a receipt, to smell out what was done in the conclave; and his good old father was so well seen in the mathematics, as that he could tell you throughout Spain, every part, every ship, with their burthens [*sic*] whither bound, what preparation, what impediments for diversion of enterprises, counsels, and resolutions.”<sup>12</sup> Naunton then proceeds to give a striking instance to show “how docible” Cecil was. His “composure was but little above five feet in height, and, in the phrase of the time, ‘Crouchback.’ King James, who was not a man of much delicacy in such matters, was fond of giving him nicknames in consequence. Cecil wrote to Sir Thomas Lake, October 24, 1605: ‘I see nothing that I can do, can procure me so much avor, as to be sure one whole day what title I shall have another. For from Essenden to Cranborne, from Cranborne to Salisbury, from Salisbury to Beagle, from Beagle to Thorn Derry, from Thorn Derry to Parret [parrot] which I hate most, I have been so walked, as I think by it I come to Theobalds, I shall be called Tare or Sophie.’”

While enjoying the entire confidence of Queen Elizabeth, Cecil was engaged in a secret correspondence with King James, which she would have regarded as treasonable, but he so carefully concealed for a century afterwards avoiding suspicion. There remains the other indubitable fact, that while similarly trusted by James, and while all affairs of states were entirely in Cecil’s hands, he was in receipt of a secret pension from the King of Spain, the very Monarch any communication with whom James treated as treason on the part of others.<sup>13</sup> It is certain that at the trial of the Earl of Essex (1566–1601) he declared Cecil the Spanish Infanta to be the rightful heir to the Crown, and though Cecil vehemently denied the imputation, he equally repudiated the notion that he favoured the King of Scots. We know, moreover, that one who as Spanish Ambassador had dealings with him, pronounced Cecil to be a “venal traitor” who was ready to sell his soul for money, while another stated that it was

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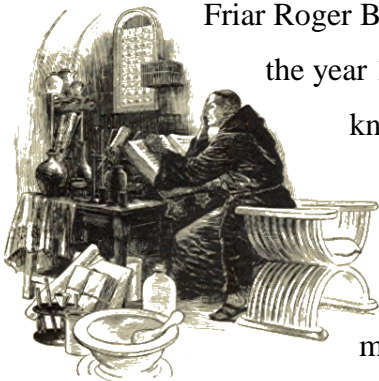
<sup>12</sup> Sir Robert Naunton, *R. O. Dom. James I*, Vol. XV, p. 105.

<sup>13</sup> (a) Digby to the King, S.P., Spain, Aug .8; (b) Gardiner, *History*, Vol. II, p. 216.

in his power to have charged him with “unwarrantable practices.” Similarly, we hear from French Ministers of the ingrained habit of falsehood which made it impossible for Cecil to speak the truth even to friends; and, from French Ambassadors, of the resolution imputed to the same Statesman, to remove from his path every rival who seemed likely to jeopardize his tenure of power.

This much is certain: whatever its origin, the Gunpowder Plot immensely increased Cecil’s influence and power, and for a time, even his popularity, assuring the success of anti-Catholic policy with which he was identified. Cecil, in reward of his services on this occasion, received the Garter on May 20, 1606, and was honoured on the occasion with an almost regal triumph. Of the proceedings subsequent to the Gunpowder Plot we are told that “in passing these laws for the security of the Protestant Religion, the Earl of Salisbury exerted himself with distinguished zeal and vigour, which gained him great love and honour from the Kingdom, as appeared in some measure, in the universal attendance on him at his installation with the Order of the Garter at Windsor.”<sup>14</sup>

## II



Friar Roger Bacon (1214–1292 *or* 1294) whose works were written at Oxford about the year 1270 has expressly named the ingredients of gunpowder as a well-

known composition, to which was then used for diversion purposes: “An artificial fire that shall burn at any distance, can be composed of salt-petre [rock-salt] and other ingredients; and afterwards a noise like that of thunder, and flashes as of lightning may be produced in the air, more terrible than those caused by nature itself; for a small quantity of the

composition, not exceeding a cubical inch, in bulk, duly applied, makes a dreadful noise, with violent flashings: and this may be done several ways, whereby a city or an army may be destroyed. These are very wonderful things, if one knew how to use them with the just quantity of proper ingredients.”<sup>15</sup> The common story respecting the invention of gunpowder was about the year 1320 when one Bartholdus Schwartz, a German monk and student in alchemy, having in the course of

<sup>14</sup> Birch, *Historical View*, p. 256.

<sup>15</sup> *Antiquarian Repertory* (Reprinted 1784).

his work mixed rock-salt, sulphur and nitre in a mortar, partly covered it with stone when by some accident it caught fire and blew the stone to a considerable distance. Besides Schwartz, many more are named to have discovered gunpowder, being Salmoneus, Albertus and Magnus, are but a few. With respect to Schwartz, it is possible the story may be true, but it does not at all follow that gunpowder was not known before this incident; being more than probable that the same discovery may have been made by more than one person. Many authorities seem to prove that gunpowder was known in the East long before the invention attributed to Schwartz, and some even add the invention of artillery to the same date as the discovery of gunpowder.

Prior to the Gunpowder Plot, King James was entertained in Stamford for the Easter term. It would be his first visit to Burghley House then inherited by Thomas Cecil, Burghley's son and elder brother to Robert Cecil. On April 27, 1603, James left Burghley House towards Oliver Cromwell's and dined at Sir Anthony Mildmay's. The same day, "Wednesday in Easter week, there were thirteen persons slain and blown in pieces with gunpowder by misfortune, at the gunpowder-mill at Radcliffe, and did much other hurt in divers places."<sup>16</sup> Should this account have been a practice for the infamous Gunpowder Plot, can only be assumed at this point. What is certain, is that on Tuesday morning, November 5, 1605, a day appointed for the opening of a new parliamentary session, London rang with the news that in the course of the night a diabolical plot had been discovered: the King and legislature were to have been "destroyed at a blow." In a chamber beneath the House of Lords had been found a great quantity of gunpowder, and with it a man calling himself John Johnson, who fully acknowledged his intention to have fired the magazine while the royal speech was being delivered, according to custom, overhead, and so to have blown King, Lords, and Commons into the air. At the same time, John Johnson refused to name his accomplices, or whether he had any. This man's real name was soon learned to be Guy, or Guido Faukes;<sup>17</sup> he "proved a most obstinate and unsatisfactory witness, and obstinately refused to give any evidence which might incriminate others." However, the actions of his confederates quickly supplied the information which he withheld. It was known that the cellar, in which the powder was found, as well as a house adjacent, had been hired in the name of one Thomas

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<sup>16</sup> Howes' Chronicle.

<sup>17</sup> So he himself always wrote it.



Percy, a Catholic and perhaps a kinsman, certainly a dependent of the Earl of Northumberland. It was then discovered that he and others had fled from London on the previous day when receiving intelligence that the plot seemed at least to be suspected. Of one we may mention is Sir Dudley Carlton (*b.*1572) who was Secretary to the Earl of Northumberland. This Earl, when detained in France by the illness of Lord Norris, was summoned to England by the Lords of the Council at the discovery of the plot, and on suspicion, he was placed in confinement; but on clearing himself was liberated. This suspicion, however, for some time acted unfavourably on Carlton's fortunes till the year 1610 when he was appointed to succeed Sir Henry Wotton (1568–1639) in the Embassy at Venice. Carlton was knighted, and then appointed Ambassador to the States-General, where he remained from 1616 to 1628, with an interval of one year (1625). He then joined the Earl of Holland as Ambassador Extraordinary to the Court of France, to excuse the King's abrupt dismissal of Henrietta (Maria's French attendants).<sup>18</sup>

Returning to our course, not many hours after the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot, the fugitives were heard of in Warwickshire, Worcestershire, and Staffordshire, the native counties of several amongst them, attempting to rally others to their desperate fortunes, and to levy war against the Crown. For this purpose they forcibly seized cavalry horses<sup>19</sup> at Warwick, and arms at Whewell Grange, a seat of Lord Windsor. These proceedings having raised the country behind them, they were pursued by the Sheriffs, and finally brought to bay at Holbeche, in Staffordshire, the residence of one Stephen Littleton, a Catholic. On Wednesday November 6, the Bailiff of Stratford William Wyatt bought up gunpowder in the town, readied the gaol and armed the constables. The Stratford schoolmaster Alexander Aspinall (Alderman) was busy counteracting the perceived threat of Catholic plotters and purchased from the townspeople gunpowder, matches, muskets and shot. Even in December, the threat of Catholic plotters was still perceived to be real. Aspinall bought swords and daggers and hung them in the armoury next to the school.

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas Birch, *The Court and Times of James the First* (1848), Vol. I.

<sup>19</sup> Also described as "Great Horses" or "Horses for the great Saddle."

It came to be known that thirteen men in all (including Guy Fawkes) were involved in the alleged treason: Francis Tresham, Robert Catesby, Thomas Percy, Robert Winter, Thomas Winter, John Wright, Christopher Wright, John Grant, Robert Keyes, Ambrose Rookewood, Sir Everard Digby and Thomas Bates. On Friday, November 8, three days after the discovery, Sir Richard Walsh (Sheriff of Worcestershire) attacked Holbeche. Catesby, Percy, and the two Wrights were killed or mortally wounded in the assault. The others were taken prisoners on the spot or in its neighbourhood, with the exception of Robert Winter, who accompanied by their host, Stephen Littleton, contrived to elude capture for upwards of two months, being at last apprehended in January 1606 at Hagley Hall, Worcestershire. All prisoners were at once taken up to London, frequently examined by the Privy Council, to trace further ramifications of the conspiracy, and especially to inculcate the Catholic clergy. “The great object of the government now was to obtain evidence against the priests.”<sup>20</sup> Torture was employed as is evident from the following extract of a letter written from Robert Cecil to Mr. Favat on December 4, 1605: “Most of the prisoners, have willfully forsworn that the priests knew anything in particular, and obstinately refuse to be accusers of them, yea, what torture so ever they be put to.”<sup>21</sup> On January 15, 1606, a proclamation was issued declaring that the Jesuit fathers, (or Tesimond), were proved to have been “peculiarly practisers” in the treason, and offering a reward for their apprehension. Clement Edmondson, writing to Sir Thomas Edmondson on March 6, 1605, declared how “one of those priests that were taken at Abington’s house in Worcestershire (of whom I doubt not but you have often heard) hath, within these two days, killed himself in the Tower by ripping up his belly with a blunt knife which he had to eat his meat. His name was Owen, born in Oxford, and was a servant to Garnet, the provincial Jesuit.”<sup>22</sup>

Before all this took place, ten days before the meeting of parliament on October 26, a Catholic peer, William Parker (Lord Mounteagle) received an anonymous letter; it was shrouded in vague and incoherent language, warning him to absent himself from the opening ceremony. This document was taken to Cecil, who “promptly divined” its meaning and the precise danger indicated, although he allowed James to fancy that he was himself the first to interpret it when it was shown to him five days

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<sup>20</sup> Gardiner, *History of England* (1883), Vol. I, p. 267.

<sup>21</sup> British Museum. MSS. Add. 6178, fol. 625.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Birch, *The Court and Times of James the First* (1848), Vol. I.

later. This is made clear from a comparison of Cecil's private letter to Cornwallis and others in Winwood's *Memorials*,<sup>23</sup> with the official account published in the discourse of the manner of the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot. Anthony Welwood (author) was of opinion that Cecil was aware of the plot long before the discovery, and that the famous letter to Mounteagle was "a contrivance of his own."<sup>24</sup> Oldmixon (historian) writes: "Notwithstanding the general joy, there were some who insinuated that the plot was of the King's own making, or that he was privy to it from first to last."<sup>25</sup> Carte (author) does not believe that James knew anything of it, but considers it "not improbable" that Cecil was better informed.<sup>26</sup> Burnet (historian) complains of the impudence of the papists of his day, who denied the conspiracy, and pretended it was an artifice of Cecil's to engage some desperate men into a plot, which he managed so that he could discover it when he pleased.<sup>27</sup> Thomas Fuller bears witness to the general belief, but considers it inconsistent with the well-known piety of King James.<sup>28</sup> Bishop Kennet, in his November 5 sermon at St. Paul's in 1715 talks in a similar manner. So extreme indeed does the incredulity and uncertainty appear to have been, that the Puritan Prynne was inclined to suspect Bancroft, the Archbishop of Canterbury, of having been engaged in the conspiracy; while one of the furious zealots who followed the lead of Titus Gates, mournfully testified that there were those in his day who looked upon the gunpowder treason as upon a romantic story, or a politic invention, or a state trick, giving no more credence to it. "This impious design, gave the greatest blow to the Catholic interest in England, by rendering that religion so odious to the people. The common opinion concerning the discovery of the plot, by a letter to the Lord Mounteagle, has not been universally allowed to be the real truth of the matter, for some have affirmed that this design was first hammered in the forge of Cecil, who intended to have produced this plot in the time of Queen Elizabeth, but prevented by her death he resumed his project in this Reign, [Jacobean] with a design to have so enraged the nation as to have expelled all Roman Catholics and confiscated their estates. To this end, by his [Cecil's] secret emissaries, he enticed some hot-headed men of that persuasion, who, ignorant whence the design first came, heartily engaged in this execrable powder treason. Though this

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<sup>23</sup> Winwood's *Memorials*, Vol. II, p. 170.

<sup>24</sup> Winwood's *Memorials*, Vol. II, p. 22.

<sup>25</sup> Oldmixon's *History of England*, Royal House of Stuart, p. 27.

<sup>26</sup> Carte's *General History of England*, Vol. III, p. 757.

<sup>27</sup> Burnet's *His Own Times*, Vol. I, p. 11.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Fuller, *Church History*, book X, p. 39.

account should not be true, it is certain that the Court of England had notice of this plot from France and Italy long before the pretended discovery; upon which Cecil framed that letter to the Lord Mounteagle, with a design to make the discovery seem the more miraculous, and at the same time magnify the judgment of the King, who by his deep penetration was to have the honour of unraveling so ambiguous and dark a riddle.”<sup>29</sup> Brewer declares the plot to be certainly known to Cecil that he had previous knowledge of the design, and that the discovery was a fraud.<sup>30</sup> Lodge holds the same opinion.<sup>31</sup> Jardine inclines toward the belief that the government contrived the letter to Mounteagle in order to conceal the means by which their information had in reality been obtained.<sup>32</sup> We will investigate the anonymous letter in a moment, but feel the following researched statement should be added: “The Cecil’s were notorious assets of Venice; their ancestral home at Hatfield house was festooned with Lions of St. Mark. When William Cecil was too old to act as Elizabeth’s controller, he was succeeded by his son Robert Cecil (the 1st Earl of Salisbury). The Venetian-Genoese Sir Horatio Pallavicini was an important controller of English state finance.” So says Webster Tarpley in his “How The Venetian System Was Transplanted Into England” printed by the New Federalist, June 3, 1996. The Cecils were holding oversight to the Peerage (system of titles of nobility) of England, Political Offices like Lord High Treasurer and Lord Privy Seal but were also Lord Lieutenant and *Custos Rotulorum* (Keeper of the English county records) for Lincolnshire, Hertfordshire and Essex. Robert Cecil was both Lord Lieutenant (Commander of militia units) and Lord Privy Seal (Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal, Seal of the Sovereign state of England). Without this Privy Seal no act of law or other could be passed. So the Cecils were basically holding all the keys of power in England. If the Venetian Bankers would have had an opportunity to push their luck, it was now inside England. The ultimate event to foment a war (the planned thirty year war?) was the Gunpowder Plot of Oct 26, 1605, where Tarpley demonstrates that Robert Cecil, a Venetian agent, was active behind the scenes. Maybe it is a coincidence but in the beginning of 1605 (March 3) Pope Clement VIII who had disapproved the works and doctrines of Paolo Sarpi and denied Sarpi access to the Vatican as a local Bishop, had died. The Papacy was back in turmoil, finding a suitable successor, as the next Pope Leo XI (born

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<sup>29</sup> Bevil Higgons, A Short View of the English History, p. 296.

<sup>30</sup> Note to Fuller’s Church History, book X, p. 39 and to the Student’s Hume.

<sup>31</sup> Lodge’s Illustrations, Vol. III, p. 172.

<sup>32</sup> Criminal Trials, Vol. II, p. 68.

Alessandro Ottaviano de' Medici) who died in April 27, 1605, in Rome, after having only been in the Holy see for less than one month. A new Pope is elected, Pope Paul V (born Camillo Borghese) who was able to stand in the Popes footprint until the end of his life in 1621. For now, we will mention that all the conspirators died in the same year upon execution of High Treason in 1605, and a brief biography of each follows.

Thomas Winter (*b.1572*) was a Worcestershire man, and a relative to several of his fellow-conspirators, namely Catesby, Tresham, Grant, and of course his elder brother, Robert. (See right image) Percy and the Wrights were relatives, so that the plot was quite a family affair. Moreover, Catesby's son married one of Percy's daughters. Thomas Winter was also a connection by marriage of Mounteagle, to whom the famous letter revealing the conspiracy was addressed, and also, so Father Gerard says, "a reasonable good scholar, and able to talk in many matters of learning, but especially in philosophy or histories very well and judicially. He could speak Latin, Italian, Spanish, and French. He was of mean stature, but strong and comely, and very valiant. He was very devout, and zealous in his faith." If Thomas Winter was chosen for the plot, it was on account of his skill in languages and his soldierly reputation.



Thomas and Robert Winter



John and Christopher Wright

John Wright (*b.1567*) was the eldest son of a Yorkshire man, a good swordsman, and very fond of using that weapon when a young man, being rude and quick-tempered, though slow of speech. According to Father Gerard, he became a Romanist about the year 1600 but it is far more likely that he had been received into the Catholic faith some five years or more before, as far back as 1596 when he had awakened the suspicions of the government by his close friendship with Catesby. If John Wright was chosen for the plot, it was

on account of his being a handy man.



Guy Fawkes

Our famous Guy Fawkes (*b.1570*) is next. He came from a family of ecclesiastical solicitors, which were connected with one or two well-known county families. His parents were (from the accession of Elizabeth at any rate) Protestants, and he was their only son. His father (Edward) was Registrar of the Consistory Court, dying in 1578, when his mother remarried Baynbridge of Scotton. Fawkes seems to have been on good terms with his step-father, who is reported to have persuaded him to become a Roman Catholic; but soon after his coming of age he left Yorkshire for the Continent, and enlisted in the service of the Spaniards occupying Flanders.

His service in the Spanish army explains the change of his first name into “Guido.” Whilst in Spain, Father Gerard reports that those who knew him “affirm that as he did bear office in the camp under the English Coronel [Sir William Stanley] on the Catholic side, so he was a man every way deserving it whilst he stayed there, both for devotion more than is ordinarily found in soldiers, and especially for his skill in martial affairs and great valour, for which he was there much esteemed.” In 1595, Fawkes assisted in the capture of Calais, and in 1604, at Catesby’s request, he came over to England when Catesby and Winter “desired one out of Flanders to be their assistant.” As Fawkes had left his native county for the Continent when quite a young man, he was consequently not known in London, and it was for this reason that induced Catesby to allot to him the task of looking after the powder and of firing the mine, since his presence at Westminster would not attract attention. Before returning to England, Guy Fawkes had been employed as a delegate of the Jesuits in the mission to obtain aid from Spain after the death of Elizabeth. This fact offers some speculation that Cecil knew him, even if he was not known in London. If Fawkes was chosen for the plot, it was on account of his military qualities, and his face allegedly being unknown to the government spies.



Thomas Percy, a person of great influence among the conspirators, especially to Catesby, was the most important amongst them. He seems to have acted as Catesby's First Lieutenant. It was he who hired (within the precincts of Westminster Palace) the little dwelling next to the Parliament House, and it was he who obtained possession of

the cellar where the powder was eventually deposited. As soon as the news of the abortive plot leaked out in London on November 5, it was described at first as “Percy’s Conspiracy.” In common with so many of his confederates, Thomas Percy was of illustrious lineage, being a scion of the great feudal house of Northumberland. He was a spy of the head of the family, Henry, the ninth Earl, the political enemy of Cecil. Authorities differ, however, as to how nearly he was related to the Earl. The nearness of the connection has been exaggerated, and he was no nearer in blood to the head of his house than a third or distant cousin. With this opinion Father Gerard agrees, when he declares that Percy “was not very near in blood, although they called him cousin.” Of the Earl of Essex, Percy was a warm admirer and devoted adherent. On the accession of James whom he had visited (shortly before Elizabeth’s death) with a view to getting from him a promise to help the English Catholics, a promise which that Monarch deliberately broke, Thomas Percy became quite a turbulent recusant in spite of his position in his patron’s household, so if Thomas Percy was chosen for the plot, it was on account of his position at Court and in Lord Northumberland’s household. In Sir Ralph Winwood’s <sup>33</sup> correspondence of 1605, who was Secretary to King James and son-in-law to Sir Thomas Bodley, there is nothing about “the Powder Treason” under its date, but there is an important confession by Thomas Fenwick long after, in 1616, relating to the transactions of “Thomas Pearce” (Percy) with Francis Radcliffe and Roger Widdrington at Dilston, in Northumberland, and the conveyance to London of a large sum of money by Percy’s man “Tailboys.” The money was delivered to a house near Temple Bar, where Percy called on the morning when the treason was discovered, and told “Tailboys” to “shift for himself.” The money was then taken all the way back to Radcliffe’s house. <sup>34</sup>

Christopher Wright (*b.*1571) our next conspirator, was actively engaged in the Essex revolt, and had been employed as one of the delegates of the Jesuits on the mission to the Court of Spain. According to Father Gerard, he was “a grave and sober man, and of great wit and sufficiency, as I

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<sup>33</sup> (*d.*1617) His death was attributed to Dr. Mayerne’s letting him bleed too soon and it is remarked that Mayerne was “commonly unfortunate in any dangerous disease.” This rumour was no doubt born on the suspicion that Prince Henry had died at the hands of the incompetent Dr. Mayerne under the suspicion of poisoning led by King James and his favourite, Robert Carr. On Winwood’s body being opened, his death seemed to be amply accounted for by decay of the vital organs: “There appeared no signs of any ill measure, as was at first generally suspected.”

<sup>34</sup> Sir Ralph Winwood, *Reports of the Manuscripts of the Duke of Buccleuch & Queensberry Preserved at Montague House, Whitehall* (London: Spottiswoode, 1899).

have heard divers say that were well acquainted with him. His virtue and valour were the chiefest things wherein they could expect assistance from him; for, otherwise, his means were not great.” Christopher Wright’s close intimacy with Lord Mordaunt brought that nobleman into grave trouble with the government, in the same way as Percy’s intimacy with his patron Northumberland proved injurious to that unsuspecting peer. At Catesby’s advice, the care of the conspirators’ house at Lambeth, used by them as their London rendezvous, was entrusted to the stern and undaunted Keyes who was an old and faithful servant of Catesby, to whom he was devotedly attached, and by whom he was admitted into the confederacy as one upon whom his powerful master could implicitly rely, and who would prove useful as a humble messenger carrying dispatches between the conspirators. If Christopher Wright was chosen for the plot, it was on account of his being stout-hearted and a handy man.



John Grant

John Grant, a Warwickshire gentleman, was well descended and connected with several old families in the shires of Warwick and Worcester. Although, according to Father Greenway, “he was of a taciturn disposition,” in the opinion of Father Gerard he was “of a very fierce and mettlesome temper,” and implicated with his friends in the Essex rebellion. Catesby’s chief reason for enrolling John Grant as a member of the confederacy, seems to have been the fact that Grant’s “walled and moated” residence would provide an excellent rendezvous for those who were to “foment an armed rising in the Midlands.” He was a devout Roman Catholic, so if John Grant

was chosen for the plot, it was on account of his fortified house.

Robert Winter, elder brother of Thomas, and son-in-law of John Talbot of Grafton, an influential Roman Catholic, whom the conspirators tried vainly to intrigue into connection with their schemes, possessed the estate of Huddington in Worcestershire. On first hearing of the plot, he expressed his dislike of the whole scheme; but eventually permitted himself to be maneuvered into joining, probably at the instance of his brother. His heart, however, was never in the business, and he took no part in stowing away the gunpowder. He deserted Catesby before the last stand was made at



Holbeach, but if Robert Winter was chosen for the plot, it was on account of his wealth and his relationship to the Talbots, and other great Roman Catholic families.

Ambrose Rookewood (*b.1577*) a gentleman of an old family in Suffolk, which had remained Roman Catholic, notwithstanding the severe persecution of several of its followers under Elizabeth, was the eldest son of his parents, and on his father's death, some four years before he joined the conspiracy, he became a very wealthy man. His wife (Elizabeth Tyrwhit) was a Lady of remarkable beauty, by whom he had two sons. The elder of these quickly wiped out the stain on his name incurred by his father's treason, and was actually Knighted by the very King whom his father had plotted to destroy. Rookewood was drawn into the plot by Catesby, whom he "loved and respected as his own life," and who overcame his scruples against "taking away so much blood" by assuring him, so it seems, that the scheme had received the approbation of his confessor. In Rookewood's stable at Coldham Hall there was an especially fine stud of horses, and Catesby, who selected each conspirator for some particular reason likely to prove advantageous to his plans, had long coveted Rookewood's steeds.<sup>35</sup>



Ambrose  
Rookewood



Sir Everard Digby

The honourable name of Sir Everard Digby was next in line as the only gentleman in regard to birth, education, and behaviour amongst his fellow-conspirators. This theory is, of course, exaggerated. He was not, for instance, so well educated or so learned as Thomas Winter; he was no better born than at least six of his confederates or so nobly descended as was Percy. In private life, Digby was not more esteemed or better behaved than Ambrose Rookewood, whilst as a soldier, his reputation was not equal to that of Guy Fawkes, nor, as a swordsman either to that of Catesby or John Wright. In a word, he is erroneously supposed by the public to have been the only respectable person engaged in the Gunpowder Plot. Digby became a favourite of Elizabeth, and cut quite a gay figure at Court, his ample fortune, no doubt, being a considerable factor in his advancement. His father, a gentleman owning estates in Rutlandshire, had died when he was a child, and had left him a

<sup>35</sup> Ambrose's grandson, also named Ambrose, was hanged in 1696, for being concerned in a plot to kill or kidnap King William III.

ward of the Crown (or award of Chancery). If Sir Everard Digby was chosen for the plot, it was on account of his social position, his friendship with influential Roman Catholics, including his wealth.

We now turn to Francis Tresham (*b.*1568) who was related to the Winters, Catesby, and Mounteagle. Being the eldest son of Sir Thomas Tresham, of Rushton, Northamptonshire, a most ardent Roman Catholic, but chiefly famous for his building operations, an interesting account of which has been compiled in



Francis Tresham

an illustrated treatise by Alfred Gotch.<sup>36</sup> One of the most remarkable results of his enterprise was the construction of a triangular Lodge at Rushton, built in honour of the Trinity, the idea running through the building being “Three;”<sup>37</sup> which was the shape of the house being an equilateral triangle, thirty-three feet in length, the floors three in number, three windows on each floor, triangular rooms and all other apartments being of three. Tresham was also involved in the Essex rebellion; for which his father was very heavily fined, and narrowly escaped execution. Francis Tresham had also been a party to Father Garnet’s schemes for obtaining aid from Spain, so if he was chosen for the plot, it was on account for the sake of his cash. There has been some unsubstantiated rumour that Tresham was an implant among the conspirators by Cecil.

In addition to the main plotters, Catesby incorporated Robert Keyes who was chosen on account of his loyalty, and last, Thomas Bates was chosen on account of his being a useful and trustworthy messenger.<sup>38</sup>

Of all the mysterious incidents enveloped in the traditional story of the Gunpowder Plot, none has taken so strong a hold upon the popular imagination as has the famous warning letter, undated and unsigned, written to Mounteagle. The receipt of this letter is generally understood to have formed the sole means whereby the plot was discovered, and the lives of King, Lords, and Commons were saved; but, it is evident that the government had some knowledge of what was going on prior to the delivery

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<sup>36</sup> Published in Northampton and in London in 1883.

<sup>37</sup> Vide Mr. Gotch’s plans.

<sup>38</sup> It is an extraordinary fact that so many of the plotters should have been engaged in the Essex rebellion in 1601. This may suggest that Essex was secretly supported by the Jesuits.

of the letter to Mounteagle at Hoxton, on Saturday, October 26, 1605. At the same time, it is perhaps rather too wide a definition to refer to all the Members of the government as being possessors of this information. It would be more correct to name instead only Robert Cecil, who seems to have known of the existence of the plot six weeks before the receipt of the letter. It may even be argued that he was aware of it as much as three months earlier. But the authorship of the letter is not the only puzzle that awaits solution, for the personal character of Mounteagle himself is almost as much a puzzle.

Mounteagle was called William Parker and inherited his title (Lord Mounteagle) in right of his mother, Elizabeth Stanley, heiress of the third Lord Mounteagle (or Monteagle). He was the eldest son of Henry Parker (Lord Morley) who died in 1618. Mounteagle did not succeed to his father's title until thirteen years after the plot, and he is always known to historians by his earlier title. It would, however, be more correct to call him Lord Morley, for he was summoned to parliament before he died as Baron Morley and Mounteagle, of which the first-named was by far the oldest dignity. Mounteagle was, at the date of the receipt of the mysterious letter in his early thirties, and had married a sister of Francis Tresham (one of the conspirators) in company with whom he had joined in the Essex rebellion, and had been very heavily fined for his pains. Being a personal friend of both Father Henry Garnet and Robert Catesby, it is clear that he sanctioned the Jesuit missions to the King of Spain, and until the accession of James remained a staunch Roman Catholic of the faction directed by Garnet and his colleagues. Mounteagle frequently met Catesby from the time of the construction of the plot down till the autumn of 1605. This is a circumstance that has been conveniently ignored by those authors who maintain that Mounteagle was not in any way privy to what was going on among his old allies. That he may, all the time, have been acting as a spy on behalf of Cecil, like Tresham, is also probable.

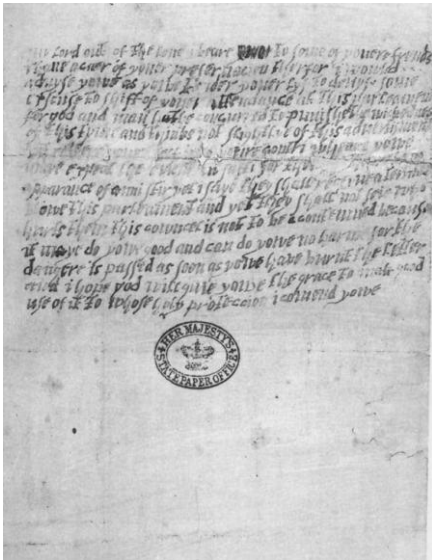
### III

Late Friday, October 25, 1605, Mounteagle gave orders that he would take supper the following day at his house at Hoxton. This sudden notice seems to have surprised his servants. To Hoxton he and his household took, and when "ready to go to supper at seven of the clock at night,"<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Cecil in his letter to Sir Charles Cornwallis (Ambassador at Madrid) on November 9, 1605, gives the hour as 6 o'clock.

one of his footmen, whom he had sent of an errand over the street, was met by an unknown man, of a reasonable tall personage, who delivered him a letter.” The letter was immediately brought to Mounteagle, who handed it to a gentleman in his household, named Warde, and told him to read it aloud. Its contents ran as follows: <sup>40</sup>



My Lord out of the love I bear ~~you~~ to some of your friends I have a care of your preservation therefore I would advise you as you tender your life to devise some excuse to shift of your attendance at this parliament for god and man hath concurred to punish the wickedness of this time and think not slightly of this advertisement but retire yourself into your country where you may expect the event in safety for though there be no appearance of any stir yet I say they shall receive a terrible blow this parliament and yet they shall not see who hurts them this Council is not to be contemned because it may do you good and can do you no harm for the danger

is passed as soon as you have burnt the letter and I hope god will give you the grace to make good use of it to whose holy protection I commend you.

Some investigation was done regarding the handwriting of this letter, and will be discussed later in more detail. Various attempts have been made to explain the nature of the danger alluded to in the letter, which the King and Cecil at the time, and others since, have understood as in allusion to the danger of the plot. Jardine describes it as “mere nonsense.” <sup>41</sup> But the meaning clearly is the danger of the letter being discovered. The Council may do him good, and can do him no harm, except through the danger of keeping the letter, which being burnt, the danger is past. James’s attention was specifically called by Cecil to that passage in the letter: “The danger is passed as soon as you have burnt the letter.” This passage brought them to the conclusion that blowing up by gunpowder was meant, and ordered that all the cellars and places adjoining the Houses of Parliament should be

<sup>40</sup> There is also a copy of the letter in the Domestic State Papers James I, November, 1605, Vol. XVI.

<sup>41</sup> Jardine, Gunpowder Plot (1835), p. 73.

searched, but that the search should be put off until the night of November 5. There is no allusion intended to the danger of the plot, as that, unlike the danger of the discovery of the letter, could not be affected by burning the letter. Yet, this letter somehow offered particulars to a Gunpowder Plot, or to poking a finger at thirteen plotters. It mentions no names, no dates, and no clues. Also, the flamboyant manner in which Mounteagle directed Warde (who was, it should be noted, an intimate friend of Thomas Winter) to read the letter, is enigmatic.<sup>42</sup> By handing the letter to Warde to read aloud, Mounteagle pretended that such a letter was beneath his notice, and that he merely regarded the message as the production of a lunatic or a practical joker. We remember that Thomas Warde was Mounteagle's Secretary, who was known to him as a friend of some of the conspirators (as Mounteagle himself was) and one of whom, Warde, the next morning told of the receipt of the letter, "as a plan concocted by Mounteagle and Tresham to stop the plot, and at the same time to secure the escape of their guilty friends, the little comedy at Hoxton was admirably concocted."<sup>43</sup> Neither the official version nor any State Paper mentions the place where the letter was delivered, which in such a mysterious matter would be the first inquiry. "Own lodging" at that time signified a person's house. Hoxton is generally stated to have been the place of delivery, which was then in the outlying suburb on the great North Road, at a house which Mounteagle is known to have occupied, and belonging to his brother-in-law, Francis Tresham; and this ownership may have been Cecil's reason for not naming it, which so curious an omission seems to imply. The style of handwriting of the letter is not from a familiarity of thirty years with old scripts, apart from the hand of disguise, the hand that an educated person would write at the time, no doubt intentionally with rather a slovenly style of handwriting that has been variously ascribed. But the direction of this inquiry is indicated by the incautious admission made by Sir Edward Coke, the Attorney-General at the trial, respecting the real manner in which the plot was discovered. Cecil's careful instructions to Coke for the trial are with the State Papers, in which he says: "Next, you must in any case, when you speak of the letter which was the first ground of discovery, absolutely disclaim that any of these [conspirators] wrote it, though you leave the further

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<sup>42</sup> The exact state of the relations existing between Warde and some of the plotters is a mystery yet to be solved. Warde may have been entirely in his master's confidence, and may have expected the letter's arrival.

<sup>43</sup> Gardiner, *What Gunpowder Plot Was* (1897), p. 124.

judgment indefinite who else it should be.”<sup>44</sup> Cecil in this effect requires Coke by absolutely disclaiming that any of the conspirators wrote (he does not say “sent”) the letter to Mounteagle, and by which alone the treason was discovered, to declare in Court, as upon the authority of the government, that none of the conspirators divulged the plot; which, in any case, could be true only so far as the disclosure to the government was concerned. Coke, however, for some reason perhaps because he was not fully in Cecil’s confidence (respecting the letter) describes the real manner of the discovery, according to his own knowledge. Towards the close of his speech for the prosecution, he said: “The last consideration is concerning the admirable discovery of this treason, which was by one of themselves who had taken the oath and sacrament, as hath been said against his own will; the means by a dark and doubtful letter to my Lord Mounteagle.” The Oath that Coke refers to, was: “You shall swear by the blessed Trinity, and by the Sacrament, you now purpose to receive, never to disclose, directly nor indirectly, by word or circumstance, the matter that shall be proposed to you to keep secret; nor desist from the execution thereof, until the rest shall give you Leave.” This Oath was taken, and the Sacrament upon it received by Catesby, Percy, Christopher Wright, Thomas Winter, and Fawkes, in May 1604.<sup>45</sup> Coke’s closing argument together with Cecil’s statement, that none of the conspirators wrote the letter, shows that the divulging of the plot preceded the sending of the letter, which was not, therefore, as is popularly supposed the means by which the plot was discovered, except to the general public. And in a letter from Cecil to Cornwallis, written on November 9, 1605: “No wise man could think my Lord Mounteagle to be so weak as to take any alarm to absent himself from parliament upon such a loose advertisement.” In the same letter, Cecil particularly describes the writing as being “in a hand disguised,” and he, like Mounteagle, would know not only the writer, but how the letter came to be written. In an expert examination of handwriting undertaken in 1916, the results showed that the angle at which the pen is held, as indicated by the long strokes, and the spacing between the lines which a writer naturally uses, have also to be considered; being the basis of handwriting, the first movements that are made in learning to write, and become each writer’s characteristics. In each specimen of William Vavasour’s handwriting, including the anonymous letter, the long strokes are generally at the same angle, and the spacing between the lines (except in No. 3) is

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<sup>44</sup> State Papers: Domestic, James I., XIX. 94.

<sup>45</sup> Harleian Miscellany (London: Gray’s Inn, 1745), Vol. III, p. 118.

throughout generally similar, while his brother George's hand is in each respect quite different. We shall see further on why this particular person's handwriting is mentioned though many other researchers have noted a familiar hand of Cecil's in the anonymous letter. (See image below)



Monteagle hastily set out, after supper for London, and gave the letter to Cecil, whom he found entertaining some of the principal Ministers of State, such as Suffolk, Northampton, Worcester, and Nottingham. The fact that all these Statesmen were to be found late on a Saturday night with Cecil in London, clearly suggests that they had been brought together by Cecil for the special purpose of receiving this letter, the arrival of which was expected. Speed had blinded suspicions; however, researchers today are not blinded by speed. Cecil's story that the receipt of the letter took him entirely by surprise, and that its contents proved an enigma to him, is very cleverly told, but termed "a

concoction.” He omits the fact that, although the letter was received late at night, he lost not a minute in placing it before his colleagues, who were all, suspiciously, close at hand when Mounteagle received it. Cecil’s letter relating to the account, sent to Sir Charles Cornwallis, the British Ambassador in Spain, four days after November 5, tells us there is no doubt that Cecil knew a plot was in progress, before the anonymous letter to Mounteagle appeared, and Cecil acknowledges as much in another letter to Cornwallis.<sup>46</sup> Dr. Welwood boldly asserts, when speaking of King James, that “the only uncontroverted treason that happened in his Reign was the Gunpowder Plot; and yet the letter to Lord Mounteagle, that pretended to discover it, was but a contrivance of his own, the conspiracy being discovered to him before by Henry IV of France; through the means of M. de Rosny, afterwards Due of Sully.”<sup>47</sup> The letter written by Cecil to Cornwallis has not met with closer attention at the hands of historians, for to those able to read, as it were between the lines, the contents reveal some important facts about the discovery of the plot. For example, Cecil’s letter completely contradicts the old story that the government knew nothing of a plot till the arrival of Mounteagle’s letter: “I had sufficient advertisement that most of those that now are fled (being all notorious Recusants) with many other of that kind, had a practice in hand for some stir this parliament.” As to the writer’s excuse, that he was less forward in causing a strict inquiry to be made than the Lord Chamberlain, it is easy to see that Cecil’s object was not to show his hand too much, but to let others obtain some credit for discovering what was already known to him. That Cecil was well informed in the facts, and felt quite secure as to the result of his preparations, is evident from the account he gives as to how he determined not to inform the King until the last moment. His shrewdness in making no open move deceived Catesby, and culminated in the ruin of the unsuspecting conspirators. Mr. Bund-Willis, in his first volume of *State Trials* (1879), says that it is more than likely that at this time Cecil knew of the whole plot. Rumours of something to be done when parliament met were already floating abroad, and a man like Cecil who had his spies all over the country, was almost sure to have heard of it. That this was in place was evident. Among the Cecil papers at Hatfield there is the following letter, the writer of which seems to be unknown:

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<sup>46</sup> Sir Thomas Cornwallis, Knight, groom-porter to Elizabeth and James.

<sup>47</sup> French Ambassador in England.



Anonymous Letter among the Cecil papers at Hatfield

3 Report Hist. MSS. Commission, Vol. IV, P. 148

Who so ever finds this box of letters let him carry it to the King's Majesty; my Master little thinks I knows of this, but in riding with him that brought the letter to my Master to a Catholic gentleman's house onward of his way into Linkonsher [Lincolnshire] he told me all his purpose, and what he meant to do; and he being a priest absolved me and made me swear never to reveal this to any man. I confess myself a Catholic and do hate the Protestant religion with my heart and that I detest to consent either to murder or treason. I have blotted out certain names in the letters because I would not have either my Master or any of his friends trouble about this; for by his means I was made a good Catholic; and I would to God the King was a good Catholic that is all that harm I wish him; and let him take heed what petitions or supplications he takes of any man; and I hope this box will be found by some that will give it to the King that it may do him good one day. I mean not to come to my Master anymore, but will return unto my country from whence I came. As for my name and country I cancel that; and God make the King a good Catholic; and let Sir Robert Cecil and my Lord Chief Justice look to themselves.

IV

To offer some investigation undertook as to who the author of the notorious Mounteagle letter lies upon, we need to go back to Francis Tresham, the planner of the triangular Lodge at Rushton, and alleged mole planted by Cecil. Francis Tresham, in September 11, 1605, succeeded his father, Sir Thomas Tresham (a great sufferer for the Roman Catholic religion), in an inheritance of at least £500,000 a year, in present money; after having, as he says, spent most of his time overburdened with "debts and wants." His first cousin was Robert Catesby, being hard with funds exhausted his money in financing the Gunpowder Plot, seeing in Tresham the chance of obtaining a further supply (though previously distrusting him) asks him in the interests of their religion to join the conspiracy, of which he becomes the thirteenth, and last, sworn conspirator on October 14, 1605. Catesby is careful to impose the oath of secrecy before fully disclosing the plot; of which Tresham, on hearing, entirely disapproves, and endeavours to dissuade his cousin from, or even to defer it; meanwhile offering him the use of his own purse if he will do so. Deciding he cannot succeed with him, he is adamant that

Mounteagle and Stourton, particularly the former, be warned; each having married Tresham's sisters; but Catesby can give no definite assurance. Tresham then intends, as he says, to get the conspirators shipped away, and to inform the government by some unknown, or anonymous means. Francis Tresham has a serving-man named William Vavasour, who attended Sir Thomas Tresham, and who, with his elder brother, George Vavasour (whose education Tresham has particularly encouraged), and their sister Muriel (the daughter of Muriel Lady Tresham) are favoured dependants of the Tresham family, being the children of an old and much valued Catholic servant. Both George and William are confidentially employed by Tresham as amanuenses, in transcribing religious (or treasonable) treatises of the time. Mounteagle unexpectedly orders a supper to be prepared on October 26, 1605, at his house at Hoxton (belonging to his brother-in-law Tresham), where he has not been for some months. As he is about to dine, a letter is handed to him by his footman, to whom it has been given in the street by "an unknown man of a reasonable tall personage," who knows that he will find him at so unfrequented a residence. Mounteagle opens the anonymous letter, pretends he cannot understand it, and shows it to his Secretary, Thomas Warde, who, he is aware, is familiar with some of the conspirators and whom Warde, the next evening, tells of the receipt of the letter, which Mounteagle at once takes to the King's Palace at Whitehall, about three miles away, where he finds Cecil with other Lords of the Council ready for dinner. "Who it was that wrote this letter to the Lord Mounteagle was never known, or how it came that King James suspected its meaning to be what it really was, is a great part a mystery to this day."<sup>48</sup> The government censors or suppresses the name of the place where the letter was delivered, since it was a residence of one of the alleged traitors. The conspirators and the Jesuit priests, (who are involved in the plot through the confessional), at once suspect Tresham; and Catesby, together with Winter, directly charge him with having betrayed them, which he denies, while urging them to escape to France and giving them money for the purpose. Although Tresham is a sworn conspirator, he alone remains behind at large, and then offers his services to the government after Guy Fawkes is arrested on November 4, 1605. A week later, Tresham is taken to the Tower; being ill, his wife and serving-man (William Vavasour) and a maid servant constantly attend him; an indulgence never under any circumstances permitted to anyone who was really a prisoner and upon a capital charge. His health

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<sup>48</sup> Cobbott's State Trials (1809).

becoming worse, he dictates a letter for Vavasour to write to Cecil, retracting a statement that he has been induced to make respecting Father Garnet. Tresham dies December 23, 1605. This letter (dying statement) being misunderstood, is considered to be so incredible that the writing is particularly interesting. Vavasour, in the presence of the Lieutenant of the Tower, writes an untrue statement (consequently using a hand quite different from his ordinary writing and identical with the writing of the anonymous Mouteagle letter) asserting that his master's dying statement was written by Mrs. Tresham (though in every way proper for Vavasour to have written), which she at once declines and says that Vavasour wrote it, who is then examined in the Tower by Chief Justice John Popham (1531–1607) and the Attorney General, Sir Edward Coke. Vavasour confesses that he wrote the dying statement at his master's dictation; and had denied it "for fear." This following statement written by Vavasour was signed by Tresham who asked his wife to deliver it personally to Cecil. Three hours later, Tresham died.

Francis Tresham's Last Statement

Written by William Vavasour on December 23, 1605

I being sent for before your Lordships in the Tower, you told me of (that) it was confessed by Mr. Winter, that he went upon some employments in the Queen's time into Spain and that your Lordship did nominate to me out of his confession all the party names that were acquainted therewith namely 4 besides himself and yet said that there were some left for me to name. I desired your Lord that I might not answer thereunto because it was a matter that was done in the Queen's time and since I had my pardon.

Your Lordship would not accept of that answer, but said that I should be made to speak thereunto. And I might thank myself if I had been worse used than I had been since my coming to the house, I told your Lordship (to avoid ill usage) that I thought Mr. Walley <sup>49</sup> was procured to write his letter for the furthering of this journey.

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<sup>49</sup> "Walley" was one of Father Garnet's aliases as was "Darcy," "Roberts," "Farmer" and "Henry Philips."

Now my Lord, having bethought myself of this business (being too weak to use my own hand in writing this) which I do deliver here upon my salvation to be true as near as I can call to mind, desiring that my former confession may be called in and that this may stand for truth. It was more than I knew that Mr. Walley was used herein, and to give your Lordship proof besides my oath, I had not seen him in sixteen years before, nor never had message nor letter from him and to this purpose I desired Mr. Lieutenant to let me see my confession who told me I should not unless I would enlarge it, which he did perceive I had no meaning to do.

Francis Tresame

24 March 1605

*This note was of my own handwriting*

By me Willia<sup>s</sup> Vavasore

The text underlined in Tresham's statement was underlined by Coke for omission when the statement was to be read at the trial. The "4 besides himself," having reference to Mounteagle, was therefore suppressed; the other suppressions in the statement were made for obvious and unfair reasons. Upon Tresham's death, the Lieutenant of the Tower writes to Cecil:

He died this night, about two of the clock after midnight, with very great pain; for though his spirits were much spent and his body dead lay above two hours in departing.

State Papers, Domestic, James I., XVII., P. 56<sup>50</sup>

Francis Tresham's death, being so opportune for Mounteagle, if not for Cecil, has been attributed to poisoning; but in Stowe's *Annals*<sup>51</sup> it is stated to have been occasioned by "strangury," though giving the date of his death incorrectly as November 22.<sup>52</sup> Having left no male heirs, Tresham's inheritance passes to his brother, who is described as of Rushton, when created a Baronet

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<sup>50</sup> Lieutenant of the Tower to Cecil, December 23, 1605.

<sup>51</sup> P. 880 (1615).

<sup>52</sup> Ten years later, a subsequent Lieutenant of the Tower was executed for poisoning a state prisoner, Sir Thomas Overbury.

on the institution of that Order by King James, the very King whom the plotters intended to destroy; and although a baronetcy at that time was merely a monetary distinction or transaction, some discrimination was no doubt made in the bestowal or disposal of that dignity, which probably would not have been conferred upon Catesby's son, who was then living, even if he had been able to afford it after the forfeiture of his family inheritance.

The Attorney General Coke, at Father Garnet's trial on March 28, 1606, pronounces Vavasour as being, in his opinion, "deeply guilty" in the Gunpowder treason; yet Vavasour is not even brought to trial, while other serving-men are tried and executed. Although Cecil expressly declares that "he will esteem his life unworthily given him," when he shall be found slack in bringing to prosecution and execution all who are in any way concerned in the treason, and his exertions in the matter are accounted to be so successful, that he is rewarded with the Order of the Garter. Francis Tresham's inheritance remains in the family; and his serving-man, the "deeply guilty" William Vavasour, goes free. When Father Garnet returned from Rome in 1585, as Superior of the Jesuits in England, he made Tresham's acquaintance, being a prominent Roman Catholic family, when Francis Tresham was eighteen. Garnet was not their confessor, and the acquaintance had dropped for at least sixteen years before the Spanish Treason in 1602. Garnet's statement, made on March 23, 1605/6, after Tresham's death, is: "I knew him about eighteen years ago, but since discontinued my acquaintance until the time between his trouble in my Lord of Essex's tumult and the Queen's death." Garnet would have neither motive nor inclination to shield Tresham, whose betrayal of the plot had brought Garnet to the Tower. He might otherwise have discerned Tresham's real meaning in his statement of "sixteen years before," which the contemporary Jesuit Father Gerard correctly interprets as before 1602 in his narrative of the plot. It was not Garnet's complicity in the Spanish Treason in the previous Reign (for which he had his pardon) that the government cared about and that so shook Cecil, but simply Tresham's dying statement being misunderstood to mean that he had not seen Garnet for the past sixteen years, which is all, at present, we should be concerned with. So Tresham lied in his dying statement and Cecil knew. Vavasour was examined in the Tower by Popham and by Coke; he confessed that he wrote the dying statement at his master's dictation, and had denied it through fear, which could only arise from having written some other and less innocent letter for him. Upon the evidence of the handwriting alone,

William Vavasour could be said as being the writer of that letter sent to Mounteagle allegedly revealing the plot. Vavasour's variety of handwriting conclusively proves him to be the author, but most probably was also the "unknown man of a reasonable tall personage" who is so described in the government story as having delivered the letter. Coke evidently knows, or suspects, that Vavasour wrote the warning letter; and he cannot understand why he is not brought to trial. He therefore expresses his opinion of Vavasour's guilt as strongly as possible, and even describes him with what for an Attorney General in ordinary circumstances would be a singular redundancy of legal expression, as being "deeply guilty" in the treason. No one would know better than Coke that in high treason itself the law makes no distinction whatever of degrees of neither guilt, nor can there even be an accessory: once participant, whatever the part played may be, all alike are principals. Coke's statement in Court has been officially in print for over four hundred years, yet no investigator seems to have noticed it and so have been led to inquire what was done to Vavasour, by which alone a clue might have been obtained to the writer of the letter.

## V

The government seems to have fallen into a wild state of terror in 1605; arrest followed arrest in rapid succession and by November 26 no less than forty-six persons were in custody in different places. A Privy Council letter was sent to Sir Julius Caesar, Sir Roger Wilbraham, Sir Edward Phillips, Sir John Croke, Sir Edward Coke, Sir John Dodderidge, Sir Francis Bacon, Sir Walter Cope, Sir George Moore and Sir Henry Montague, authorizing further search apprehensions and commitment. November 19 saw a Privy Council letter sent to the same persons mentioned, directing an examination of the persons apprehended and found chargeable with a suspicion of the conspiracy, and enclosing a list of persons to be examined. A general form of interrogation was drawn up which was to be ministered to those who were to be examined. The Commissioners acted promptly on these instructions; they held examinations on November 23 and 29; on December 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 30, during this time they examined twenty-six persons; they afterwards examined seven more. After the capture of Guy Fawkes, no time was lost in taking him before the Privy Council, and he was actually brought before the King in his bed-chamber before four o'clock in the morning. This feverish haste to question him is another point in favour of the supposition that the details of the plot were

already well known to Cecil. After leaving Whitehall, Fawkes was sent under a strong guard by water to the Tower, where the King directed the Lieutenant that he was to be tortured. James set down in his own handwriting the directions of torture: "If he will not otherwise confess the gentlest tortures are to be first used unto him and so on step by step to the most severe. And so God speed your good work." That these directions were carried out strictly we have ample proof; Fawkes' confession signed by him remains to this day and the way in which the single name "Guido" is written shows that the torture process had been carried on step by step to the utmost of James's wishes.

Towne on the monday night following and Confesseth also that  
 the said Percy, the Examinato, Robert Catesby, Thomas Wintter  
 John and Robert Wright mett at the for named house on the  
 backside of S<sup>t</sup> Dunstons on sonday night last.

He further saith that the wednesday before his apprehension  
 he went forth of the Towne to a house in Enfield  
 Chase on this side of Shrooball where Wally doth ly-  
 and thither came Robert Catesby, Graunt and Thomas  
 Wintter, whome he stayed untill sonday night following.

Hee Confesseth also that there was speech amongst them to  
 drawe S<sup>r</sup> Walter Ransley to take part w<sup>th</sup> them, being  
 one that might stand them in good stead, as others  
 like sort were named.

Taken before us and subscribed  
 by the Examinato before us.

Robert Catesby  
 Edward Forsett

Guy Fawkes's confession

To how many more the torture was applied does not appear, but we may be sure that the King did not scruple to order or his Ministers to use torture where they thought it necessary. And at last, Coke had got what evidence he deemed sufficient, so towards the end of January all was ready for the trial. Of the thirteen conspirators originally engaged in the plot, no less than eleven were either captured or killed within a period of four days from the fatal day of November 5. Of these eleven men, Catesby, Percy, and the Wrights were dead; Fawkes was in the Tower; Digby, Thomas Winter, Grant, Keyes, Bates, and Rookewood were on their way and under arrest. Of the remaining pair, Francis Tresham was in London, but not yet actually arrested; and Robert Winter was in hiding. By November 12, Tresham also was under lock and key, so that, if we omit the fugitive Robert Winter (the least important of the band), we find the government's measures for the repression of the conspiracy, both at Westminster and in the Midlands, had been so skillfully executed that it had only taken the authorities seven days to kill or imprison all those who had been actively engaged in the Gunpowder Plot. Of the original number of thirteen, only eight of the conspirators survived to be committed for trial; they were Thomas Winter, Guy Fawkes, John Grant, Robert Winter, Ambrose Rookewood, Thomas Bates, Robert Keyes, and Digby; all arraigned at Westminster Hall, on January 27, 1606, before a Commission consisting of the Lord Chief Justice Sir John Popham; the Lord Chief Baron Sir Thomas Fleming; Sir Peter Warburton a Judge, and the Earls of Salisbury, Northampton, Nottingham, Suffolk, Worcester and Devonshire. Sir Everard Digby was separately arraigned, and tried and sentenced immediately after the conclusion of the case against his friends. The Privy Council for the Crown was Sir Edward Philips and Sir Edward Coke.

The trial from beginning to end was a mere farce. The prisoners, after having to listen to a very long, by no means truthful, and very violent speech from Coke, and having heard their several examinations, confessions, and voluntary declarations, as well of themselves, as of some of their dead confederates read out, were merely asked, what they could say, wherefore judgment of death should not be pronounced against them, and the trial was virtually over, so far as the hearing of their case was concerned. The conspirators, tied to separate hurdles, were dragged, lying bound on their backs, through the muddy streets to the place of execution, there to be first hanged, cut down alive, drawn, and then quartered. Guy Fawkes, weak and ill though he was, seems to have suffered the least, for he



was dead by the time his body was taken down. Rookewood lived until he reached the quartering block. Keyes, breaking the rope, was probably killed by the knife; whilst Digby was in full possession of all his senses on being cut down, and even felt the pain of a bruise on the head when his body fell to the ground.

“That beast Waad,” as Raleigh called him, had been appointed Lieutenant of the Tower about eleven weeks before the capture of Guy Fawkes at Westminster. Prior to his appointment, however, he had held several very important diplomatic and political posts. He had faithfully served Burghley, and was destined, in the matter of the Gunpowder Plot, to serve with equal fidelity the son, Robert Cecil. Sir William Waad, under Elizabeth, had been Secretary to Walsingham, and afterwards Clerk of the Privy Council. He had been sent on frequent diplomatic missions to Madrid, Paris, and the Low Countries. In 1588 he was elected a Member of Parliament, and in 1601 represented Preston, where his Protestant zeal made him very unpopular among the Roman Catholics of Lancashire. Soon after the accession of James, he was Knighted, and in August 1605, he was at Cecil’s request, appointed Lieutenant of the Tower. Waad certainly seems to have enjoyed a unique career. He had, in fact, been connected with the detection, or attempted detection, of almost every conspiracy hatched in England during the eventful twenty years antecedent to the Gunpowder Plot. He had ransacked the belongings of Mary Queen of Scots at the time of Babington’s conspiracy; he had taken a prominent part in the discovery of the mysterious Lopez affair under Elizabeth; he had helped to suppress the Essex rebellion in 1601; he had been employed in the matter of the proceedings of Cobham and Raleigh, as regards their connection with Father Watson’s conspiracy. He was, therefore, likely to prove, in the eyes of the government, an ideal gaoler for the conspirators and Jesuits captured after the failure of the Gunpowder Plot, as well as for Raleigh.

On January 23, 1606, the chief matter in parliament handed over a project for the making of November 5th to become a holiday forever “in thankfulness to God for our deliverance, and detestation of the papists.” And of memorial peculiarities, we may only turn to the correspondence between Thomas Lorkin and Thomas Puckering, dated June 30, 1613, to be given as an example:

My last letters advertised you of what had lately happened concerning Cotton, who yielding himself to the King's clemency, doth nevertheless utterly disavow the book, and constantly denieth to be the author of it. Hereupon, his study hath been searched, and there divers papers found, containing many several pieces of the said book, and (which renders the man more odious) certain relics of the late Saints of the Gunpowder Treason, as one of Digby's fingers, Percy's toe, some other part either of Catesby or Rookwood (whether I well remember not), with the addition of a piece of one of Peter Lambert's ribs, to make up the full mess of them. If the proofs which are against him will not extend to the touching of his life, at least they will serve to work either misery or affliction enough.<sup>53</sup>

The greatest precautions were taken to prevent Catholics securing relics. From Campion's execution, a young man who dropped his handkerchief into the blood on the ground was taken and committed. Another contrived to possess a finger, and later on, an arm was taken from the gate where it was nailed. Father Parsons managed to buy the rope in which his martyred friend was bound and hanged with, and died with it round his neck. Father Parsons had hired lodgings near Bridewell church, close to the Thames, a most convenient meeting-place for priests and other Catholics, and also for the work of his publications. It was more suitable for this purpose because it belonged to a Protestant bookseller, and so was not likely to be suspected. Here, Parsons deposited his stock of rosaries, medals, crucifixes, and religious objects he had brought from Rome.<sup>54</sup>

I end this article with Sir Edward Coke's saying at the trial of the gunpowder conspirators: "Ages to come will be in doubt whether it were a fact or a fiction." The only person who escaped conviction in the alleged Gunpowder Plot, was William Vavasour, the "deeply guilty" party who had wrote the anonymous letter to Mounteagle.

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<sup>53</sup> Thomas Birch, *The Court and Times of James the First* (1848), Vol. I.

<sup>54</sup> Dom Bede Camm. *Lives of the English Martyrs* (1914), Vol. II.